

JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE

Vol. 70

January-March 1957

No. 275

000

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

Folklore in Literature: A Symposium

1. Introduction Daniel G. Hoffman 1
 2. The Identification of Folklore in
American Literature Richard M. Dorson 1
 3. Folklore and Literary Criticism Carvel Collins 9
 4. Folklore in the Literature of Elizabethan
England John W. Ashton 10
 5. Folklore in Literature: Notes Toward a
Theory of Interpretation Daniel G. Hoffman 15
- Proverbial Comparisons in the Plays of
Beaumont and Fletcher Archer Taylor 25
- Nursery Rhymes in *Finnegans Wake* Mabel P. Worthington 37
- The Folktale: A Symposium
1. Collections and Indexes: A Brief
Review Warren E. Roberts 49
 2. Standards for Collecting and Publish-
ing American Folktales Richard M. Dorson 53
 3. Problems and Projects in the American-
English Folktale Herbert Halpert 57

NOTES & QUERIES

- A Source for William Gilmore Simms's "Sharp
Snaffles" Alexander E. Jones 66
- Ethiopian Folktales Ascribed to a Late
Nineteenth Century Amhara Wit Simon D. Messing 69
- A Note on a California Theme T. K. Kroeber 72

[Title Page]

ETHIOPIAN FOLKTALES ASCRIBED TO THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AMHARA WIT,
 191 ALĀQA GÄBRE-HANNA:—Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia today, is gradually be-
 212 coming the *lingua franca* of the empire. Until recently it was spoken mainly on the fertile
 538 highland plateau of central and northwestern Ethiopia, in part of what was formerly known
 as Abyssinia. Predominantly Coptic Christian, the Amhara people have sacred writings in
 Ge'ez, old Ethiopic. Amharic has adapted this ancient script to its own use. The folklore of
 the Amhara is mainly oral (except for religious texts) and represents a crosscurrent of Mid-
 [565] dle Eastern and African cultures. Traditionally, Amhara society was one of priests, feudal
 lords, and peasants. Lower on the social scale were non-Coptic ethnic groups who per-
 formed such important economic functions as ironsmithing and pottery-making.

This is reflected in the folklore. On non-religious, everyday subjects, the wit of the Am-
 538 hara is peasant-like, earthy, full of tales of Rabelaisian appetites and sly solutions to human
 522 problems. The Amharic language lends itself readily to puns and hidden meanings, since
 193 many verbs can have double or triple interpretations due to the hidden variations in the
 basic verbal stem and the absence or presence of gemination of some consonants. The lis-
 tener must pay close attention. If he misinterprets the context and fails to discern the pun,
 he is often made the butt of the next tricky joke by those who have heard it before. The
 more a storyteller and wit masters the *sowaso* 'grammar' of the Amharic language, the
 better he can manipulate this humor.

A master of this art was *Alāqa* 'Chief' (an honorary title) Gäbre-Hanna, a con-
 538 temporary of Emperor Menelik just before the end of the nineteenth century. As far as is
 159 known, he never put into writing any of his stories, witticisms, linguistic gymnastics, and
 philosophical puns. But to this day the peasants and even the nobles remember his stories
 well and tell them so often that a number of versions have developed.

He was a native of Gondar and had all the provincial pride of the "Gondarey" in the
 one-time greatness of this town and district that is now back country. He lived at the time
 the present capital, Addis Ababa, was being built and the King of Shoa had become Em-
 peror of Abyssinia. Like many another "Gondarey," Alāqa Gäbre-Hanna pretended to dis-
 disdain the newfangled importations of Emperor Menelik and the growing employment of
 subjugated Galla tribal chiefs at the imperial court. Jokingly, he took the liberty of refer-
 ring to the Emperor's home province, Shoa, as "that Galla province." (Even today much
 [191] Gallia is spoken there, a result of the sixteenth century conquest of the area by Galla
 tribes.) No one else would have dared such a remark, but he was popular with Emperor
 Menelik and especially with the Empress Taitu, and could tell them certain frank truths
 and tease them with irony in a semi-polite manner. However, he was not a court jester.

538 When miffed, or in temporary disgrace, he would request permission to return to his native
159 Gondar. Subsequently he would send excuse after excuse to the capital for refusing to go back there, until he felt that he had been sufficiently coaxed to assuage his pride as a scholar and that further hesitation might result in serious difficulties, even for him. Empress Taitu was a very powerful figure and often protected him when he had gone too far with Emperor Menelik (her fifth husband).

[114] Although the following stories have no titles except "Story of Aläqa Gäbre-Hanna," I have given them names to point up the major emphasis. This material was gathered orally from Amharic-speaking peasants and nobles in the Gondar region (during my field trip to that area in 1953-54 on a grant from the Ford Foundation).

539 *The Wit And The Nitwit.* AG-H didn't like the rumor going around that he had become a snob, that he didn't greet common people politely any more. One day, accompanied by his usual retinue of friends and admirers, he was greeted effusively with deep bows by a certain donkey-driver who was known as none too bright. In return, to quash the nasty rumors, AG-H bowed just as deeply, from the hips, instead of the usual nod from one of his station in life. But, unable to resist the temptation for a witicism, he greeted the donkey-driver with the words "Endäc al-derachuh? 'How are ye?'"

[576] Unaware that the second person plural had been used, the proud donkey-driver was soon boasting at the nearest barley-beer hut of the honor he had received. His cronies made him repeat the exact remark, suspecting some twist. They quickly convinced the poor fool that the greeting had included him in the same class with his donkeys, and the simpleton slunk away in shame.

Another version of the story: But the donkey-driver was, after all, a proud Amhara. Realizing that he had been made a fool of, he took his walking stick, went to the house of AG-H, and beat him unmercifully. This was one time that his wit struck back at him.

Good Eating Comes First. Though greatly honored at the court of Emperor Menelik in newly-built Addis Ababa, AG-H was once again homesick for his native Gondar. Finally, he was granted permission for a leave home.

He promptly organized his small caravan and was about to mount his mule when he noticed two fat cows being taken to slaughter. Thinking of the long trip ahead without fresh beef, he decided to wait around and obtain a good share of the meat which was being rapidly parcelled out. The meat had to be washed down with a huge jugful of barley-beer and honeymead, and so the day passed with pleasant feasting. It was late afternoon when it happened that Emperor Menelik came riding by. Surprised to see the homesick scholar still in the capital, the Emperor addressed him: "I gave you permission to go, and you are still here?"

But, as usual, his wit did not fail AG-H. "*Lam gäb* 'the cows were entering,' your Majesty," he replied. (The phrase is used to indicate dusk, when the cows come home, too late to start on a trip. The cows had indeed "entered," i.e., into the stomach of AG-H; and no one could accuse him later of having told a lie to the Emperor.)

Pride Of A Man From Gondar Province. The next time AG-H became homesick occurred in the middle of the long Lenten fast. The housewives of Gondar were famous for their many spicy recipes for cooking fish in that season, and when AG-H thought of these his mouth watered and nothing pleased him any more in Shoa province.

One day he was invited to dine at the house of a noble of Shoa. The odor of fish being cooked attracted him to the cooking hut. It seemed to him that the woman cook had not properly cleaned the fish and had added too much water. He began to moan and groan.

"What's the matter?" asked his host.

Pointing to the watery fish stew, AG-H replied: "The fish are better off than I. They are in their native state, but I am so far from mine!"

Safety From Robbers. Once again the long rainy season was over, the rivers had receded, and the trails were passable again. AG-H managed to obtain a generous purse of Maria-Theresa thalers from the Empress and was on his perennial way back to Gondar.

He was just emerging from the lowland valley of the Abbai (Blue Nile) to climb up the escarpment of the dangerous province of Gojjam, which he had to traverse. Suddenly one of his companions spotted a band of robbers waiting at the top of the upland trail.

Notes and Queries

71

AG-H quickly ducked behind a bush. He placed the purse in his *gäbäte*, the lengthwise half of a gourd which all travelers carry for mixing their ration of crushed linseed (called *sälba*) with water. He wrapped this in a piece of colorful imported silk that he had bought as a gift for his home church. Flattening the package as much as possible, he placed it on his head in the manner of the Abyssinian priests when they carry the *tabot*, the sacred tablet which is taken from the inner sanctum of the church to a pool of water on the day of the saint after whom the church is named. With his free hand he quickly folded his daytime toga in the manner of one going to church and borrowed the largest cross his companions were carrying. Holding it before him like a weapon, and looking serious, holy, and unafraid, AG-H led the caravan as he climbed up the trail in a slow, dignified manner.

When the bandits drew near, they bowed politely. AG-H stopped and gave them the cross to kiss. They asked respectfully to which saint his *tabot* had been consecrated. He replied with the most common one, *Qeddus Giyorgis* 'St. George.' Then they wanted to know which parish church it was from. By this time the old wit had returned to AG-H, and he answered: "*Yätaḥba markha Giyorgis*" 'St. George of the linseed-paste.'

The bandits nodded gravely and escorted him all the way up the escarpment, explaining that the area was dangerous and full of organized bandits. Some days later they learned how they had been fooled, and forever after they were on the lookout for AG-H on the banks of the Blue Nile.

Poetic Revenge. AG-H had spoken a candid truth once too often and was in official disgrace with Emperor Menelik. As usual, when miffed, he retired to Gondar.

But this time, having left Addis Ababa unofficially and quickly, his finances were low. Adding to his discomfiture was the news, brought to him by a friend from the capital some months later, that Menelik was amusing himself by telling stories of the misdeeds and follies of AG-H.

An idea of poetic revenge came to him. He instructed his friend to go to the Emperor and report that AG-H had died and that his kinsmen in Gondar were too poor to hold a fitting *äszkär*, a big memorial feast held forty days after death.

Empress Taimu was first to hear of the sudden death of her favorite. She promptly stormed into the chambers of Emperor Menelik, much as she had stormed into the battle of Adua against the Italians shortly before, riding with the troops of her own province. "You murderer," she shouted at the Emperor, "you broke his heart, you banned him from the court." She threw up her hands in misery, wailed as if a close kinsman had died, moving back and forth, chanting aloud about the goodness of the deceased. After a while this began to affect even the iron Menelik. At this point the messenger brought up the rest of his news, the *äszkär* problem. Menelik promptly gave him the huge sum of ten thousand thalers, to assuage his own feelings of guilt and to calm the Empress.

For a while AG-H enjoyed the fruits of his revenge back in Gondar. But he knew that he could not hide forever. Moreover, his generosity to kinsmen, neighbors, and transient monks was such that before long his money was gone.

So one day he reappeared in Addis Ababa. When he first approached the Empress, the stout woman almost fainted. She immediately sent a messenger to the Emperor. Unwilling to believe the news, he sent the messenger back to ask whether the Empress was feeling well. Thereupon, she took AG-H by the hand and stormed into Menelik's chamber. The Emperor was too shocked and surprised to be angry. He managed to inquire, "How is it that the dead arise from the grave?"

With a deep bow, AG-H replied: "Your Majesty, it is not uncommon in our Christian religion to arise from the dead" [alluding to the resurrection of Jesus].

Another version: While in disgrace, and living in Gondar, the newly-rich AG-H neglected his field, wasted his money and, toward the end of the rainy season, his wife and children were starving. So he sent his long-suffering wife to Addis Ababa with the false story of his death and need for *äszkär* money. Explaining his reappearance later, AG-H said, "Your Majesty, I so longed to see the faces of your Majesties again that I was not at peace in the earth and had to return."

A third version: "Your Majesty, they had so many rules and regulations up there [pointing to heaven] that I preferred to return and live under the rules of Your Majesty."

Sex On The Hill. Women are forgetful creatures. Sometimes they don't even remember that they don't wear trousers under their cotton skirts. One day AG-H was climbing up a steep trail in the company of men and women. A connoisseur of female flesh, he kept behind the women

539 and was always looking up intently and with concentration. One of his friends asked him, "What are you looking for?"

"*Māuca*," replied the wit in his classic manner. [The literal meaning is "exit," i.e., either the exit from the trail on the tiring climb, or "the place where we emerge" from the female body.]

[56] *The Wit At Home.* Home in his hut in Gondar, AG-H was one day at dusk lying on his bed. His wife had gone to the river to wash her private parts, as is the custom of the Amhara women at nightfall. Tired from the uphill climb from the valley, she rested before the hearth to dry herself, but dozed off. Soon AG-H heard a cannonade of farting, issuing from his half-conscious wife. He called out to her, "Where are you? Come to bed!"

Awakening, she said dazedly, "I am just drying myself."

To which he replied, "You are drying yourself so much that you are cracking apart."

[902] *A Woman's "Way."* [In accordance with ancient custom, women used to pluck out their pubic hair, rubbing ashes between their fingers to get a good grip while plucking.]

One day a girl student of AG-H was late for her lesson. Taking a quick short-cut across the back yard, she tumbled into the ash heap, soiling her lower toga and her legs with the ashes. She excused her appearance to her teacher, saying, "Oh, Master, I was so eager to come quickly, and now I have dirtied myself with ashes all over."

"That is your way," nodded AG-H.

Only much later did the girl learn that he had meant not only the wrong way she had come, but was referring to the fact that being smudged with ashes was the natural "way" for a woman.

[564] *The Pot Of Caste.* [The women of the Falasha caste are makers of pottery, a despised occupation among the Coptic Amhara, though much appreciated by the Amhara, who buy all their
[323] better pots from them.]

The wife of AG-H, quarreling with a certain woman, accused her of being of Falasha ancestry and that her mother had been a pottery-maker. One day that woman returned from the river valley, carrying a large, full pot of water on her back. She saw AG-H sitting in front of his hut, and decided to take the opportunity to complain to him about the taunts of his wife.

AG-H disliked being involved in the petty quarreling of the womenfolk, but he listened quietly. As she took leave, he patted her full clay pot and said, "*This is your work.*"

She thought that he meant she should not quarrel with his wife, should instead attend to her tasks of fetching water, cooking, etc. But on further reflection what had he meant? Had he accused her of being a pottery-maker herself?

Jealousy Is Dangerous. AG-H was also notorious for his prowess in bed and his fickleness in love.

One day his wife had to go far down to a valley to fetch water, since the dry season had left only water holes in the river bed. She left him in charge of their baby. Taking the baby with him, he went to the hut of his current girl friend and spent the afternoon making passionate love. As it happened, this woman also had a baby about the same age. Dusk came rapidly, and AG-H knew that his wife would soon be back. In the hurry, he took the wrong baby.

A moment after his return his wife arrived, laden with water pot and firewood. When she beheld the baby of her current rival, she became very angry and said, "This thing is not my baby! Shall I throw it in the fire?"

Calm as ever, AG-H replied: "There is a fire also in the house of his mother."

University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

SIMON D. MESSING